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SUBJECT: FINLAND: NATO TOUR PROPOSAL

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Embassy Helsinki proposes two NATO Tours for FY09, designed to promote greater understanding of the Alliance in the wake of the conflict in Georgia. The GOF's security policy emphasizes the importance of multilateral cooperation, including with the US, NATO and in particular the EU. Though the GOF is an active participant in the Partnership for Peace, public opinion remains largely against NATO membership and the GOF's current policy is to maintain the "option" of NATO membership. Following the conflict in Georgia public uncertainty about NATO membership increased, and public debate about possibly renewed "spheres of influence" might cause some to see NATO in an old light as a bulwark against Russian aggression. NATO Tours therefore become important tools to help policy makers dispel old attitudes, explain NATO's core objectives and principles and emphasize its multilateral cooperation, including in international crisis management. END SUMMARY.

Finland moves towards Euro-Atlantic institutions

2. (SBU) Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland has moved steadily towards Euro-Atlantic institutions while carefully managing its relationship with its Russian neighbor. The Government of Finland (GOF) security policy recognizes that global problems, development crises and regional conflicts have become increasingly significant and responding to these threats requires increasing bilateral and multilateral cooperation. "International Crisis Management" is the popular overarching concept for multilateral cooperation. Under GOF security policy the role of the U.S., NATO and the development of the transatlantic relationship are of "key importance." However, what is most important for the GOF is the "capability and influence of the European Union."

NATO Uncertainty Grows for a Partner in Russia's shadow

3. (SBU) Following this security policy, Finland participates actively in the Partnership for Peace. However, a long history in the shadow of Russia means cooperation with NATO is fraught with difficulty. Many Finns retain a vision of NATO as a bulwark against the Soviet Union - and now Russia - and not more broadly as an alliance of collective defense and common values. A majority of the public remains opposed to NATO membership. Following the conflict in Georgia - with visions of Russia reasserting "spheres of influence" and the EU and U.S. stating that there will be no "business as usual" as long as Russia maintains its current course - uncertainty about NATO has increased. (NOTE: Also following the conflict, the number of

people viewing Russia as a threat to Finland's security also has grown, from 20 to 26 percent. END NOTE.)

Goal: Increase understanding of and decrease uncertainty about NATO

14. (SBU) The recent conflict in Georgia generated public debate about Finland's security policy, in particular about the role of the EU in regional security and the GOF's policy towards NATO membership. The first parliamentary debate on security after the conflict was filled with praise for the prominent role played by the EU presidency and the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in the Georgia crisis. References to NATO largely surrounded reaffirmations of the GOF's current policy of maintaining the "option" of NATO membership. The GOF's position, poised carefully between those in favor and those against membership, means that few in the Cabinet speak forcefully in favor of NATO as uncertainty grows about Finland's relationship with the Alliance (Foreign Minister Stubb being a notable exception).

15. (SBU) In Finland public opinion often follows government policy, as in the mid-1990s when public opinion regarding EU membership only turned in favor after the GOF launched a campaign supporting accession. Any change in public opinion about NATO would necessarily involve the active participation of policy-makers. NATO Tours therefore become an important tool to help policy makers dispel old

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attitudes, explain NATO's strategic concept and emphasize its multilateral cooperation, in particular with the EU.

Proposal 1: NATO's Strategic Concept

16. (SBU) As NATO considers a revision of its Strategic Concept next year, a tour that has this Concept as its umbrella theme will be able emphasize important points. One would be to examine NATO's core principles and objectives, as a way to dispel outdated attitudes about the Alliance. Another would be to stress NATO's role in international crisis management, e.g., peacekeeping operations and responding to humanitarian emergencies. And yet another would acknowledge the centrality of the EU in GOF security policy - i.e., a way to allay concerns about NATO and change opinion would be to highlight the degree of overlap and cooperation between NATO and the EU. Foreign Minister Stubb himself alluded to the benefits of a trip to Brussels. In a speech to Finnish Ambassadors last August, Stubb said that a trip to Brussels cured him of any "NATO phobia," pointing to the same debates occurring in the EU and the heavy overlap of participants. (COMMENT: Already an avowed Atlanticist, Stubb was making a rhetorical flourish, but made an important point nevertheless. END COMMENT.)

Proposal 2: NATO and International Crisis Management

17. (SBU) This tour has a considerably narrower focus. In pursuing its security policy, and despite its relatively small population, Finland has become a significant provider of security, in particular by participating in peacekeeping operations alongside the U.S. in Kosovo and Afghanistan. The Finnish people are rightly proud of those contributions to regional and global security. A program that explains NATO's current role in promoting stability by focusing on peacekeeping operations could help quell uncertainty

about the Alliance, and perhaps turn ingrained and outdated attitudes about NATO. (NOTE: We propose either an exclusively Brussels-based Tour for this program, or one that incorporates a visit to Kosovo or Afghanistan, as an "on the ground" element would have immense benefits to participants. END NOTE.)

Timing and participation

18. (SBU) Post proposes the tours take place late in the second quarter of FY09 or early in the third, i.e., around the Summit in Strasbourg. This would engage the participants in briefings and discussion either as a preview or review of the Summit. For both programs we envision approximately 8-9 parliamentarians, with 3-4 drawn from key ministries like Foreign Affairs, Defense or Finance (the latter targeting the subject of funding peacekeeping operations). We have reached out to parliamentary committees and Ministries, and have received strong expressions of interest and names of potential participants.

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